

# WHAT IS A BETTER ARGUMENT?

THE BETTER  
ARGUMENTS  
PROJECT

## Report on Key Operating Principles



## **THE BETTER ARGUMENTS PROJECT™**

In an era of deep divisions, many Americans have recognized the need to heal schisms, repair the social fabric, and restore trust and civility in public discourse. [The Better Arguments Project™](#) is based on the premise that American civic life doesn't need fewer arguments; it needs better arguments. We aim to make that possible.

[The Better Arguments Project](#) will begin with an exploration of core American arguments with communities across the country through spirited in-person experiences. The goal of this report is to outline key operating principles to keep at the center of this work.

Based on our learning through our upcoming pilot process, we will supplement this report with guidance for replicable action.

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# WHY BETTER ARGUMENTS?



The Better Arguments Project™ was created to encourage Americans to engage one other in better, more productive debates about core American ideals. The project had its genesis in an [article](#) by Eric Liu in *The Atlantic*.

The project stems from the foundational premise that America doesn't just contain arguments, America is an argument – between Federalist and Anti-Federalist worldviews, strong national government

and local control, liberty and equality, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, *pluribus* and *unum*.

Across the country, citizen-led efforts are underway that attempt to bridge the divides created or unearthed by the 2016 US presidential election. These efforts are admirable. Done wrong, however, these efforts have the potential to compound our political problems rather than ameliorate them. Profound philosophical divides with deep historical roots exist across the country about the role of government, the job of citizens, how to deal with the economy, and what it truly means to be American. Instead of papering over these differences, we need to understand their origins, grow smarter about engaging them, learn to ask better questions, and get better at arguing with one other about them.

A definable set of polarities, including the ones listed above, have shaped the American project from its inception. The point of American civic life is never for one side or the other to achieve "final" victory; it is our role as citizens to grapple in perpetuity to discover and forge solutions together. Perhaps our highest shared value as Americans is our right and freedom to argue. The success of our shared civic life depends on these arguments continuing forever. If the arguments end, if one side or the other has collapsed, eventually the American experiment is at risk of ending as well.

However, the arguments in American politics today are inadequate. They are stuck in a decaying two-party institutional framework; they fail to challenge foundational assumptions about capitalism or government; they center on symbolic proxy skirmishes instead of naming the underlying change; they focus excessively on style and surface. Americans can do better.

As we engage in these arguments about how to prioritize our ideals and reckon with the consequences, we must learn to have *better* arguments – ones informed by historical, cultural, and civic awareness that extend our horizons and support our ability to adapt to changing circumstances at home and abroad.

We believe that arguments begin when at least two people truly care about a topic. Whether they know it or not, those two people already have something in common. Through this work, we aim to harness that idea, and allow it to evolve into a sense of community. In this sense, arguments don't have to drive us apart. Better Arguments can bring us together.

# THE BETTER ARGUMENTS PROJECT DISCOVERY PHASE

From July to December 2017, the Better Arguments team traveled around the country to meet with more than 75 advisors, ranging widely in age, background, expertise, and perspective. With these advisors, we addressed the fundamental question: What is a Better Argument? This document summarizes our learning throughout this discovery phase. The purpose of this document is to offer key operating principles based on our learning. We have organized our findings into three main sections: 1) [Three dimensions of arguing](#), 2) [Principles of a Better Argument](#), and 3) [Template for Action](#).



Thank you to our advisors for your invaluable guidance. Many of the advisors are listed at the end of this report.

# THREE DIMENSIONS OF ARGUING



Underlying context exists within all civic debates, and it can be broken into three major categories. Acknowledging and understanding these categories is a prerequisite to any Better Argument.

## History

Today's civic arguments are rooted in a historical context. Remember, arguments - being able to reckon with differences and forge joint solutions - are critical to a healthy American civic life. Debates in American

politics can be boiled down to a finite number of never-resolvable, fundamentally American tensions. The list of tensions includes:

- Liberty vs. Equality
- Strong Central Government vs. Decentralized Government
- Federalist vs. Anti-Federalist
- Color Blindness vs. Color Consciousness
- Individual Rights vs. Collective Responsibility
- Pluribus vs. Unum

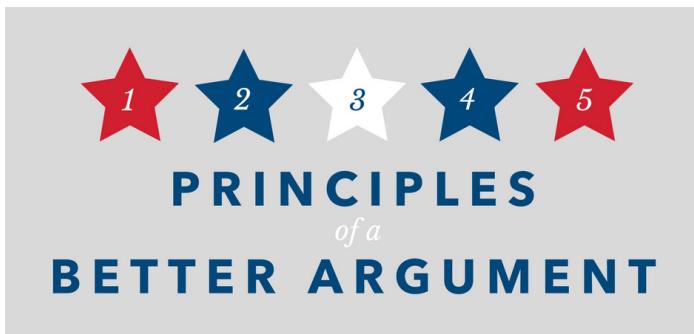
## Emotion

A Better Argument is one in which all participants use emotional intelligence. This means that each party must seek to understand why the other party is taking a certain stance, rather than negating that party's opinion. In his book *Bonds that Make Us Free*, American philosopher C. Terry Warner, who was frequently referenced by Better Arguments advisors, describes avoiding an emotional cycle of accusing one another to excuse one's own behavior. To understand this concept, picture any couple arguing about household chores. One member of the couple might ask why the other did not take out the trash, while the other might respond by ignoring the question and instead remarking that the first did not do the dishes. Instead, parties must step up to take responsibility for their own piece of the issue to create a new, more productive cycle. The same dynamic can unfold - or be avoided - in civic arguments.

## Power

A Better Argument requires being honest about power. In many spaces of civil discourse, participants do not enter as equals. They enter reckoning with imbalances. These inherited inequalities need to be named before a Better Argument can take place. An important part of the Better Arguments process will be to reckon with these realities.

# PRINCIPLES OF A BETTER ARGUMENT



The following are five major tenets of a Better Argument, as recommended by the Better Arguments Project's team and advisors: 1) take winning off the table, 2) prioritize relationships and listen passionately, 3) pay attention to context, 4) embrace vulnerability, and 5) make room to transform. Every participant should hold these five principles at heart.

## Take Winning Off the Table

In a Better Argument, all parties must shift their common goal. Conventionally, parties enter an argument with a goal of winning, or at least reaching resolution. These should not be a priority in a Better Argument. Instead, the goal should be framed as the reinstitution of civility to build a common community.

Civility is not the absence of argument, nor is it merely the absence of noise. For this reason, Robert Woodson, founder and president of the Woodson Center, cautions that success can never be defined as simply reaching consensus. For example, policy consensus among elites is too often detached from realities being lived on the ground.

Instead, according to Damien Hooper-Campbell, chief diversity officer at eBay, civility in an argument is the ability to listen to another party and to understand their opinion. A Better Argument can only take place in an atmosphere that does not reward points for one party disputing the other's claim.

Eugene Meyer, president of the Federalist Society also underscores that Better Arguments participants should prioritize the act of understanding another person's view. If discussants can commit to making all efforts to truly and fully comprehend another person's perspective, numerous barriers to discussion are dismantled naturally. Importantly, Meyer also emphasizes that fully understanding an opinion does not require or even suggest agreeing with that view. No party should be encouraged to compromise their own values to embrace new ideas.

In this sense, a Better Argument rewards listening. Kenneth Lee notes that during interactions with his clients as a pro-bono attorney, he is in an atmosphere that rewards listening and not winning an argument with the client. Because of this, he has been able to gain new understanding into different worldviews that he hears from his clients. In contrast, Isaiah Ward, a high school student from Chicago, IL, notes that when two parties are not willing to listen, it will lead to a bad argument, because there is no way for them to understand each other's points of view.

In fact, seeking the truth can itself be incentive to participate. Pete Wehner, senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, says that no one individual can know the whole truth, and points to C.S. Lewis' interpretation of "first friends" and "second friends" as a model for truth-seeking. In this model, first friends are the alter ego. They have your same worldview and they confirm ideas that you believe to be true. Second friends are the opposite; they are your "anti-self." You fundamentally disagree on major

ideas, but you value your friendship precisely because of that. Second friends help each other to come closer to understanding the whole truth.

## Prioritize Relationships and Listen Passionately

A Better Argument places relationships at the center, and requires that all parties are truly listening to one another. Joan Blades, co-founder of Living Room Conversations, makes the point that the quality of an argument is irrelevant if no one is listening in the first place. Indeed, many of our advisors noted that without the commitment to listen, a Better Argument cannot take place.

For this reason, Blades argues that building relationships among participants is the most important factor to facilitate a Better Argument. If individuals care about one another, they are more likely to hear one another. Therefore, as the relationship is built, so is the ability to listen. Participants should listen to learn, not to win.

**Without the commitment to listen, a Better Argument cannot take place.**

Martin Carcasson, founder and director of Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation, agrees. He argues that when relationships are adversarial, arguments often lead to more polarization. Facts are merely ammunition. In some cases, the higher quality the argument, the *more* parties will polarize unless the relationship is changed. Once parties shift from adversaries to collaborators, however, arguments can bring people together and facilitate learning. Facts become key tools to solve problems together. As a result, the focus on changing the relationship should always come first.

When this occurs, honoring the relationship becomes more important than the outcome of the argument. Parties are more likely to practice empathy, a factor that Pete Peterson, dean of Pepperdine School of Public Policy, highlights as being key to engaging in an effective argument.

## Pay Attention to Context

A Better Argument acknowledges culture. Understanding the presence of culture in any debate increases its accessibility. We know that arguments in American civic life today can often be tied to either core historical principles or prevailing political theories. However, former Congressman Mickey Edwards, a vice president of the Aspen Institute, suggests that facilitators make discussions more relevant to participants by framing them in terms of the participating community's particular concerns and cultural norms.

For example, discussions in various communities related to the removal of Confederate statues are technically rooted in core American tensions such as liberty vs. equality and color blindness vs. color consciousness. However, when engaging in those local discussions, these prevailing principles may not need to be named and dissected.

Instead, advisors recommend that Better Arguments within a community should begin with specific questions relevant to that community, and parties can move on to grasping the core principles from that starting point. To use the example above, the conversation about the statue's removal might be centered around a question such as: what are the values that we stand for collectively as a community? Or: how do we want to demonstrate our values as a community?

Stephen Cornejo Garcia, director of Inclusive Diversity at Allstate, notes that keeping the role of culture forefront is critical to understanding each other more fully, but warns that the culture component can make any situation more complex. He argues that this complexity is necessary, and that attempts to avoid it for the sake of efficiency can be damaging to progress. When efficiency is prioritized, thoughts and emotions may go unsaid. This is not only unproductive in the short term but destructive in the long term, leading to grudges that can increase divisions.

## Embrace Vulnerability

In civic life today, many Americans only engage with circles that confirm their own worldviews. One major reason why this withdrawal occurs is because entering a space of argument means making yourself vulnerable.

Matt Kibbe, president and chief community officer at Free the People, argues that vulnerability is necessary, and can lead to progress. He encourages civic leaders like politicians to model vulnerability. In turn, others become free to practice this behavior themselves. On the flip side, if leaders avoid modeling this behavior themselves, their followers are also discouraged from participating.

Jeremy Carl, research fellow at the Hoover Institution, says that building trust is a prerequisite to practicing vulnerability, and that a Better Argument has trust built into its process. Estela Ortega, executive director of El Centro de la Raza, agrees, and encourages partnership with locally rooted organizations that have already established bonds of trust with the communities they serve. She argues that these partnerships lead to more inclusive, diverse experiences.

Another method for building trust, according to multiple Better Arguments advisors, is establishing points of commonality among participants through exercises that humanize each other. These exercises can include the use of prompts, personal stories, and humor.

Shared ground rules are also important to create an environment of trust. Some ground rules may be overarching, and could apply to every experience. For example, one recommended prerequisite to participation is that hateful and dehumanizing language is unwelcome, and will be called out.

Other ground rules may be specific to the topic being discussed in any particular experience. One example is to agree to discuss, expand and not discount personal or group interpretations of patriotism. For example, Sandy Rattley, executive producer at Futuro Media Group, points to the current debate around standing for the national anthem. It is possible for both those who choose to stand and those who choose to kneel to consider their own actions to be patriotic. If an individual on one side or the other states that he or she is patriotic, this should be accepted as true.

In this context, it is important to distinguish between fact-statements and value-statements. The Better Arguments Project must live in the realm of facts. Factually untrue statements can and should be challenged. However, value-statements, individuals' statements about their personal beliefs, should be accepted as true.

## Make Room to Transform

A Better Argument is a transformational experience for all involved. Without a goal of winning or even reaching resolution, the goal of a Better Argument becomes to change how we engage with one another in order to build a community.

It is important to note that transformation can be painful at times and celebratory at others. Painful moments are necessary and should not be avoided. Kathryn Girard, executive vice president at Skirball Cultural Center, notes that when pain is expressed, it evokes compassion in others and may help to open hearts and minds to different views.

Above all, Better Arguments are inspirational. Each moment of transformation can lead to another, and the Better Arguments Project aims to seed a movement in this way.

**Better Arguments within  
a community should  
begin with specific  
questions relevant to  
that community.**

# CORE ACTION ELEMENTS

The recommendations in this report are intended to increase healthy debate in American civic life, promoting mutual learning. We believe it is vital for citizens to engage in healthier, more productive debate. And we believe the best way to do that is to focus on place: to ground this work in the real issues of a real community. When launching these efforts, we suggest that civic practitioners consider the following core action steps as the foundation of their process:



- **Lay the groundwork.** Better Arguments facilitators should invest in relationship-building with local institutions and leaders as partners and advisors. It is critical to allow the movement to come from people within the culture of that community and to avoid engaging in social engineering at all costs. Prepare participants before they enter the room so that they have a shared understanding of what is about to happen and establish expectations again in person.
- **Name the argument.** Efforts to organize communities to produce Better Arguments should be focused on specific topics that are rooted within the community. Better Arguments facilitators should first examine existing local debates and determine how Better Arguments can support progress around these topics.
- **Get together in person.** Whenever possible, create a space to convene in person. Make every effort to be as inclusive as possible, and pay special attention to groups within the community that might not typically attend.
- **Be human first.** Before engaging in argument of any kind, facilitate activities that help participants to see one another as human, establish commonalities, and build bonds of trust.
- **Practice the argument.** Create space to allow participants to lean into argument. Encourage the spirit of trial and error. Provide models and demonstrations to increase participation. Remember: Argue to learn, not to win.
- **Reflect on the argument in a way that gives it life.** Rather than one side winning, the outcome of a Better Argument should be a shared action. Encourage participants to agree on a next step developed through their Better Arguments experience. The contracted next step could range from a simple agreement to stay in touch to committing to design a community project together.
- **Document the process to set the cycle anew.** Any Better Arguments participant can become an ambassador. Collect and provide materials that can be shared so that these ambassadors can encourage Better Arguments elsewhere.

This template is intended to demonstrate a set of core elements that should be included in any Better Arguments process. While the elements listed above do not add up to a full action plan, any action plan should include each of these core elements. The Better Arguments Project team plans to pilot the process outlined in this report in at select communities around the country. As we pilot this process, we will build and share supplemental guidance for replicable action. We encourage others to practice implementing these processes as well, and we welcome reflections, feedback, and stories from your community.

# THE PARTNERS

The Better Arguments Project is a partnership among the Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program, Facing History and Ourselves, and The Allstate Corporation.



**The Aspen Institute** is a nonpartisan forum for values-based leadership and the exchange of ideas. **The Aspen Institute Citizenship and American Identity Program** focuses on the challenge of sustaining strong citizenship in America and coherent national identity in an age of demographic flux and rising economic inequality. The program encompasses a range of cross-partisan activity, from workshops and public forums to leadership summits and seminar-style discussions.



**Facing History and Ourselves** is a global educational organization that reaches millions of students worldwide every year. Using the lessons of history – and history in the making – Facing History equips teachers to provide students with the skills to think critically and wrestle with difficult issues. Teachers work closely with students to make personal connections between the past and their present. The rigorous curriculum sparks their desire to look beyond themselves and participate in the broader world. Facing History is creating future generations of engaged, informed, and responsible decision-makers who will stand up for justice, truth, and equality when faced with injustice, misinformation, and bigotry. Facing History transforms required lessons in history into inspired lessons in humanity, empowering youth who will change the world for the better.



**The Allstate Corporation** is the nation's largest publicly held personal lines insurer, protecting approximately 16 million households from life's uncertainties through auto, home, life, and other insurance offered through its Allstate, Esurance, Encompass and Answer Financial brand names. The company provides additional protection products and services through Allstate Benefits, Allstate Roadside Services, Allstate Dealer Services, Arity and SquareTrade. Allstate is widely known through the slogan "You're In Good Hands With Allstate®." Allstate agencies are in virtually every local community in America.

**The Better Arguments Project** team includes:

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**Caroline Hopper**, Program Manager, Citizenship and American Identity Program, The Aspen Institute

**Seth Henderson**, Program Coordinator, Citizenship and American Identity Program, The Aspen Institute

# ADVISORS

To prepare for this work, the Partners have hosted several active brainstorming sessions with groups of advisors. This document synthesizes the learning and best practices that have emerged from these sessions.

The Partners invited several leading practitioners and communicators of civics to join closed-door convenings, in which we explored best practices and recommendations to cultivate Better Arguments.

## Participants include:

**Sam Ball**, Co-Founder and Director, Citizen Film

**Joan Blades**, Co-Founder, Living Room Conversations

**Martin Carcasson**, Founder and Director, Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation

**Jeremy Carl**, Research Fellow, The Hoover Institution

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**Laura Freveletti**, Senior Manager, Corporate Relations, Allstate

**Kathryn Girard**, Executive Vice President, Skirball Cultural Center

**Steven Greenhut**, Senior Fellow and Western Region Director, R Street Institute

**Cheryl Harris**, Senior Vice President, Sourcing and Procurement Solutions, Allstate

**Christy Harris**, Vice President, Talent Acquisition and Inclusive Diversity, Allstate

**Howard Hayes**, Senior Vice President, Marketing and Product/Service Innovation& Development, Allstate

**Damien Hooper-Campbell**, Chief Diversity Officer, eBay

**C. Davida Ingram**, Public Engagement Programs Manager, Seattle Public Library

**Matt Kibbe**, President and Chief Community Organizer, Free the People

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**Kate Nack**, Director, Corporate Relations, Allstate

**Estela Ortega**, Executive Director, El Centro de la Raza  
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**Elliot Stultz**, Senior Vice President & Deputy General Counsel, Allstate  
**Karen Tamley**, Commissioner, Chicago Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities  
**Robert Woodson**, Founder and President, The Woodson Center

**The Partners also met with a group of youth advisors, including:**

**Kya Chanlevitz**, High School Student, Woodland Hills, CA  
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**Brianna Hampton-Murff**, High School Student, Chicago, IL  
**Sophie Hilland**, High School Student, Chicago, IL  
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**Isaiah Ward**, High School Student, Chicago, IL  
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**The Partners have also consulted additional leading experts in civics and communication:**

**Steven Becton**, Program Director for Equity & Inclusion, Facing History and Ourselves  
**Roger Brooks**, President and Chief Executive Officer, Facing History and Ourselves  
**Roderick Hart**, Shivers Chair in Communication, Professor of Government and Founding Director, Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, University of Texas at Austin  
**Maureen Loughnane**, Executive Director, Chicago, Facing History and Ourselves  
**Eugene Meyer**, President, Federalist Society  
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